



# U.S. Embassy Astana

## Central Asia Regional Environmental Hub Newsletter

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### **I. Hub Highlights**

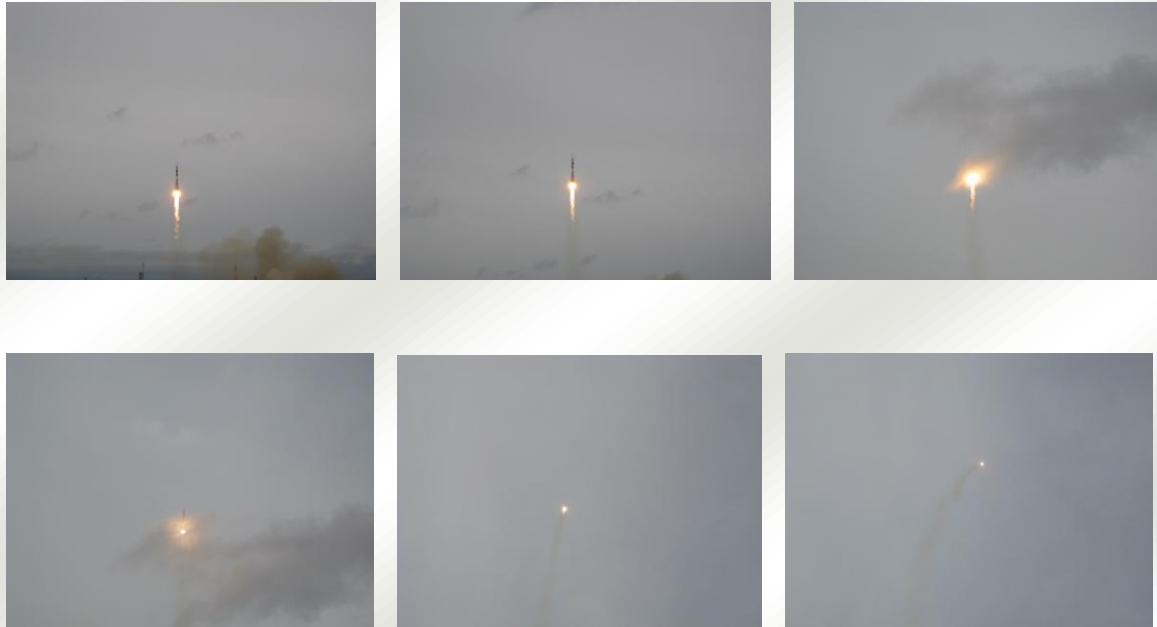
#### **US Ambassador To Kazakhstan Goes To Baikonur**

The US Ambassador to Kazakhstan and the Regional Environmental Officer (REO) linked up with the NASA delegation and went to Baikonur, Kazakhstan, to observe first-hand the March 26 launch of the Russian Soyuz space capsule into orbit to link up with the International Space Station. The capsule had three men: Commander Gennady Padalka (Russia), Flight Engineer Michael Barrett (U.S.), and Microsoft co-founder Charles Simonyi. This was Mr. Simonyi's second trip into space, the first "space tourist" to do so.

The Soviet Union originally constructed the Baikonur Cosmodrome as a site for the testing and development of its first ICBM, and it later expanded the site in the late 1950s to accommodate space flight activities. All Soviet and Russian human spaceflight missions have originated from Baikonur. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baikonur fell under Kazakhstan's control, and Russia and Kazakhstan now have a lease agreement whereby Kazakhstan leases Baikonur to Russia for \$150 million per year until 2050. Located in semi-arid Central Kazakhstan, the Baikonur Cosmodrome covers 4000 square miles of

territory (80 by 50 miles) and contains 52 launch pads. The nearby town of Baikonur City, built to support the Cosmodrome, had been a secret town with different names for a number of years in an attempt to hide the Cosmodrome's actual location. From a high of 100,000, Baikonur's population now numbers approximately 60,000. It is currently a closed city, but the Kazakhstan Space Agency has indicated that there is a possibility of re-opening Baikonur again with an eye to increasing tourism to the area.

Here are some photos of the actual launch:



### **Ambassador Delivers Speech On Democracy To University Audience**

On March 16, US Ambassador to Kazakhstan delivered a speech on democracy to approximately 100 students and professors at the Kazakh University of Humanities and Law in Astana. Following his address, the Ambassador answered questions on topics ranging from whether U.S. law applies equally to visitors to the United States as well as U.S. citizens, to whether changing mentalities is as important as changing institutions. The Ambassador underscored that rule of law is part of the U.S. democratic system, and thus the law applies equally to everyone. On the need to change mentalities, he agreed that democracy is a long process, noting that President Obama's election would not have been possible 50 years ago. The pro-government, Russian-language "Express K" daily (circulation 21,000) ran the speech in its entirety.

### **USAID Signs An MOU With The Kazakhstan Ministry Of Health**

April 16. USAID signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Health providing an overview of our agreed assistance/cooperation in the health sector. The USAID Regional Mission Director and Health Minister Doskaliev signed. The US Ambassador attended the ceremony. In a tribute, the Minister acknowledged USAID's significant contributions and assistance to Kazakhstan. The MOU states that USAID "intends to provide technical assistance to the Government of Kazakhstan to incorporate modern, quality-improvement techniques and evidence-based international standards into ongoing health-system reforms. Specific goals of this assistance include: (i) improving the quality of health care; (ii) controlling the spread of HIV, tuberculosis, other emerging diseases; (iii) mitigating resistance to antimicrobial pharmaceuticals; and (iv) supporting efficient and effective health-management systems."

### **Astana Earth Day A Big Public Diplomacy Success**

On Earth Day, US Embassy Astana volunteers, led by the DCM, cleaned up a highway roadside in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Astana. The city gave us permission, and a city official greeted us at the clean-up site. Local television and newspaper media also came and interviewed the DCM extensively (and also briefly interviewed the REO), and took lots of photos and video. Our crew made the evening news that night, with positive reporting about the United States' custom of doing volunteer work and about the US Embassy being a "good citizen" in Kazakhstan.

Here are a couple of photos: One with the press interviewing the DCM; and one showing part of our group hard at work:



### **USAID-Supported TB Day Activities For The Region**

To mark World TB Day, traditionally commemorated on March 24, USAID programs held a wide array of events throughout Central Asia. To increase awareness of this disease among the populations, a series of public service announcements were broadcast on the local TV stations. Concerts, conferences, and contests delivered information about TB to medical workers, youth, and other groups. Journalists had an opportunity to attend extensive training sessions and roundtables with TB specialists. TB is a major health priority in the region, and USAID hopes that these events have sensitized the specialists as well as the population to this issue.

### **World Tuberculosis Day Conference**

Embassy Astana's DCM addressed a World Tuberculosis Day conference for medical students at the Kazakhstan National Medical University on April 7. The conference, entitled "We Can Stop TB," aimed to motivate students to get involved in the country's fight against tuberculosis (TB) -- a disease that claims the lives of over 2,000 Kazakhstanis every year -- and to generate awareness among the general public. The event also emphasized the role of primary health-care practitioners as a first line of defense in controlling the disease. Approximately 80 students and faculty from the Kazakhstan National Medical University attended the event, which several national media outlets covered.



## **Central Asian Leaders Clash Over Water At Aral Sea Summit**

A summit on the future of the shrinking Aral Sea ended in Almaty on March 28 without any tangible progress. The presidents of the five Central Asian states gathered for a summit of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) to discuss ways to protect the Aral Sea, but the discussion took an unexpected turn when the conversation turned to the more intractable problem of water management. The upstream countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan insist they need to construct hydropower stations - Kambarata in Kyrgyzstan and Rogun in Tajikistan - in order to solve acute energy shortages during winter. Uzbekistan's President Karimov staunchly opposes plans to build Kambarata and Rogun. In a rare show of solidarity, Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev sided with Karimov concerning the construction of upstream dams. The leaders eventually pledged to boost the status of IFAS and hold a donors' conference in Kazakhstan in 2010 on the Aral Sea. The statement concluded with a confirmation of their "interest in drawing up a mutually acceptable mechanism for the overall use of water resources and the protection of the environment in Central Asia, taking into account the interests of all the region's states."

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## **II. Other News**

### **Afghanistan**

#### **Biosecurity Engagement In Afghanistan**

Officials from the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation's Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction (ISN/CTR) met with Afghan officials and scientists working in the fields of public and animal health and environmental protection in Kabul. The purpose of the visit was to explore opportunities to start a Biosecurity Engagement Program (BEP) in Afghanistan. Afghan officials expressed interest in collaboration with the U.S. to improve safety, security, and good practices in Afghan laboratories. BEP can support training for Afghan scientists, provide basic equipment for Afghan laboratories, and offer technical assistance on biosafety and biosecurity. To accelerate progress on such programs, BEP supports placing a science fellow at Post.

## **Kazakhstan**

### **Kazakhstan Joins Earth Hour**

March 28. Liter. On March 28 at 20:30, for the first time, Kazakhstan will join the world wide initiative "Earth Hour" aimed at getting people to switch off their lights for one hour. More than 80 countries and a billion people will take part in the action. Besides a large number of people who will switch off the lights in their homes, administrations of globally known buildings and objects such as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Table Mountain in South Africa, Sydney Opera House, Federation Tower in Moscow, and Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro expressed commitment to shut off their lights for Earth Hour. Kazakhstan will support Earth Hour by shutting the lights off on Baiterek Tower, Astana's main landmark and a symbol of the city.

### **Kazakhstan Launches Second Phase Of The Syr Darya Regulation Project**

19 March 2009. The Times of Central Asia. The Launch of the second phase of the Syr Darya river regulation project, aimed at the preservation of northern part of the Aral Sea, is planned for 2009. It is expected that the sea shore will once again be visible from Aralsk city, as it was back in the 1960s. Anatoliy Ryabtsev, the chairman of the Committee on Water Resources in the Ministry of Agriculture of Kazakhstan, noted that, as a result of the first part of this project, the water level in the Aral Sea has risen by four meters. The mineralization of water has also decreased, thereby creating a favorable environment for breeding native species and sturgeon fish in the northern part of the sea. One of the achievements of the first phase of the project has been an increase in the capacity the Syr Darya River. The project is estimated to cost around US \$250 million.

### **Kazakhstan Spends \$296 Million To Reform Healthcare System**

27 February 2009..Interfax-Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstani government launched a 5-year project to reform the healthcare sector valued at \$296 million. Health Minister Zhaksylyk Dorskaliyev, presenting the Health Sector Technology Transfer and Institutional Reform Project, said that the key objective of the program is to ensure a higher quality of the medical services and overall modernization of the healthcare system through introducing international standards, advance training of medical personnel and development of infrastructure." The total value of the project is \$296 million including 40% or \$117.7 million in borrowed funds provided by the World Bank. Dorskaliyev believes the priority task is to eradicate "Soviet mentality" from the domestic healthcare sector. "We are afraid to close down any medical institution caring for the jobs, but not for its practical use and efficiency. The market can regulate such issues: if a hospital lacks any advanced diagnostics or employs obsolete equipment, such hospital must give place to others. Making a choice will be a prerogative of a patient," Dorskaliyev said. The Health Sector Technology Transfer and Institutional Reform Project was requested by the Government of Kazakhstan to help implement key aspects of the State Health Care Reform and Development Program by bringing international experience, expertise and standards to complex areas such as reforms in healthcare financing, healthcare quality improvement, medical education, and health information system.

## **Tajikistan**

### **Earth Day in Tajikistan Shared With High School Students**

Embassy Dushanbe's USG program alumni and implementing partners shared the spirit and idealism of Earth Day with grade school and high school students in Tajikistan. FLEX 2008 Alumna Regina Sokolova, our American Corner Coordinator in Qurghon-Teppa, introduced kindergarten and pre-school kids to the international celebration explaining "What is the Earth Day" in Russian and Tajik and having them make Earth Day posters, memorizing an alphabetical poem about the Earth, and playing games. The American Corner in Khujand organized a poster contest April 16 for students and teachers on environmental issues, and Corner Coordinator Madina Pulatova showed them how to conduct Internet research on environment. English Language Fellow David Holzmeyer and IREX organized a clean-up of the Syr Darya riverfront park and tree planting for high school students April 24. UGrad alum and IREX program coordinator Bakhtiyor Isoev also organized a community clean-up in Khujand for high school students.



### **Children Learn To Stay Healthy With USAID Project**

In February USAID completed its Personal Hygiene and Sanitation Education project, implemented by the NGO Save the Children. The project taught basic hygiene and nutrition concepts to 40,000 primary school children at 80 schools in the Khatlon Region with the goal of keeping healthy children in school. To facilitate adoption of healthy behaviors, the project enlisted 460 high school students to teach grade school children basic hygiene, and trained 600 Village Development Committees in long-term behavior change methods. These activists have become leaders of change and helped their siblings adopt new, more hygienic practices. Additionally, the project built 20 latrines and 12 hand-washing stations at schools in the Jomi and Khuroson districts to prevent the spread of diseases.



## **USAID-Supported Health Financing Reform To Be Replicated Nationwide**

Recently, the Ministries of Health and Finance of Tajikistan issued a joint order to extend the per capita payment system for the primary health care to the entire Khatlon and Sughd provinces. This system had been introduced on a pilot basis in a few districts of these provinces by the USAID ZdravPlus project over the past couple of years. The ministerial order signifies the beginning of the country-wide roll-out for this fundamental element of health financing reform critical to increasing the quality of primary health care. ZdravPlus is training specialists in support of replication and sustainability of the new system that is expected to take 1-2 years to be introduced nationwide.

## **Embassy Policy Specialist's Work on Alternative Energy**

Embassy Dushanbe arranged for Bogdan Prokopovych, a PhD student in Rhode Island, to spend a month in Tajikistan researching alternative energy. He found that the Government of Tajikistan is focused almost exclusively on developing large hydro-power projects, to the exclusion of solar and wind. On the other hand, he found a relatively small – but motivated – private sector that has started to develop solar resources. His report is the first comprehensive analysis of the possibility for developing solar/wind capacity in the country. Tajikistan currently relies almost exclusively on hydropower for its energy needs. The popularity of hydropower has overshadowed the value of other alternatives, such as solar, wind, and biomass resources. The compound crisis in the winter of 2008 generated interest in small-scale renewables when Tajikistan lost most of its electricity supply. Many see the high cost of alternative technologies as a major impediment to their use. Nevertheless, Tajikistan is blessed with the potential for small-scale renewable energy systems: Tajikistan receives around 3,000 hours of solar radiation per year, which makes solar power attractive for both electricity and water heating; an average wind speed of over 6.0 m/sec in Faizobod permits the use of small wind turbines, and biogas is a viable option in villages where most families raise cattle.

Those interested in obtaining a copy can contact Almaz Saifutdinov (Saifutdinov@state.gov) or Greg Naarden (NaardenGL2@state.gov) at the U.S. Embassy.

## **Turkmenistan**

### **DOTS Included In Medical School Curricula**

Starting 2009, students at the medical schools across Turkmenistan will be learning about the tuberculosis treatment strategy DOTS (The Directly Observed Treatment, Short-Course), thanks to USAID programs. USAID's TB prevention and control program, implemented by Project HOPE, has helped develop curriculum that includes DOTS and prepared a cadre of trainers to roll out the new curriculum in the medical colleges. The WHO-recommended TB DOTS strategy is a key implementation methodology for the Turkmen National TB program that seeks to reduce the number of deaths and cases of this epidemic disease. Introduction of TB DOTS strategy into curricula of medical schools is one of the first steps that will ensure sustainability of DOTS in Turkmenistan.

## **Uzbekistan**

### **US Embassy Tashkent Signs League of Green Embassies Statement of Principles**

US Embassy Tashkent reports that its Embassy has taken the first steps toward joining the League of Green US Embassies. The Ambassador signed the "League of Green US Embassies Statement of Principles, which commits member embassies:

- to provide leadership at our Embassies by exemplifying and encouraging personal actions that will lead to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;
- increase the use of renewable energy and to begin taking action to reduce energy usage at our Embassies by 30 percent by 2015;
- to institute Embassy recycling programs to the extent possible for bottles, cans and paper;
- to establish an energy conservation program at each of our Embassies for all USG properties under COM authority;
- to work with the Secretary of State in seeking additional funding for the Overseas Building Office Energy Conservation and Sustainable Design Program;
- to share ideas on how to improve the energy efficiency of our buildings; and
- to cooperate with our counterparts on energy efficiency and other strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

### **U.S. Education Alums Celebrate Earth Day In Tashkent**



About 20 alumni of U.S.-sponsored education programs joined a group of about 60 environmentally aware people for a two-day program commemorating Earth Day, staying at the Kelajak Camp near Khojikent, northeast of Tashkent. On the first day, they played games with environmental topics, talked about ways they can conserve resources, and cleaned up a truckload of garbage along the lower course of the Bulaksu River. The Youth Ecological Network of Uzbekistan and the Eremurus environmental group organized the “Youth Generation for a Pure Bulaksu” event, and the U.S. Embassy sponsored this year’s program through its Democracy Outreach Alumni Grant. On the second day, the group braved the wet weather and picked up about 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of garbage from the area around the river. Yuriy Mun, a member of Eremurus and one of the program coordinators, said he was happy to see the number of participants has grown steadily in recent years. “It’s especially pleasant to see that the project inspires people,” he said. “I’d like to believe that boys and girls will keep contributing, not necessarily in a big way, but with important input in resolving ecological problems.”

### **World Bank President’s Letter to President Islam Karimov**

On April 23, Uzbekistan’s Pravda Vostoka newspaper published the letter, which the World Bank President Robert Zoellick sent to President Islam Karimov. In this letter, Mr. Zoellick has largely reiterated the World Bank’s earlier statement on water and energy developments in



Central Asia highlighting that the Bank will carry out an independent feasibility study of the Roghun hydropower project proposed by the Government of Tajikistan, including its regional environmental and social impact assessments and follow-up extensive riparian consultations in 2009-2010. The letter also stresses that the feasibility study will be conducted by authoritative consultants, and international panel of experts will provide their independent opinions. In addition, Mr. Zoellick said that the World Bank welcomes discussions with Uzbekistan on proposed solutions of the energy problems of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and that these problems in the region can only be solved if the regional countries cooperate together and respect each others' national strategic interests.

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### **III. Regional News Clips**

**Note:** Baktiyor Mukhamadiev's excellent **Weekly Central Asian ESTH News**, sent from our Tashkent office, contains most of the news events that are happening in the region. This section modestly supplements his reporting.

#### **Tajikistan's Former Soviet Nuclear Sites Pose Threat To Nearby Villages**

April 08, 2009. [www.asiaplus.tj](http://www.asiaplus.tj). The first Soviet atomic bomb, tested in 1949, was made from Tajik uranium. Now Tajikistan is dealing with the dangerous legacy of its role in the Soviet nuclear program: 55 million tons of radioactive waste that, in some sites, is leaking into the soil and local water supplies. Tajik and international specialists say the leaks pose a major risk to residents' health and the environment. Most of the radioactive waste in Tajikistan comes from the country's Vostokredmet plant, in the northern city of Chkalovsk. The plant was built in 1945 to mine and process uranium from deposits in Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics. Tajikistan's northern Sughd region is home to 10 radioactive burial sites, eight of which have been sealed. But at the two remaining sites, loose powder from nuclear residue has simply been dumped in unsealed rooms, where it can blow through cracks or seep out into the ground during heavy rains or flooding. The two sites, located in the towns of Taboshar and Dehmoi, are near residential areas, and have remained unsealed despite being closed in 1992. The situation has raised concerns among officials from Tajikistan's Nuclear and Radiation Safety Agency (NRSA). Hundreds of millions of dollars are needed to seal off the Dehmoi and Taboshar sites. But such funding is far beyond the means of the country, which is one of the poorest in the former Soviet Union. Currently, the sites are being regularly monitored by Tajik specialists as well as international organizations, notably the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency.

#### **Uranium Tailings in Central Asia May Cause Environmental Disaster**

April 20. Interfax. Storage of depleted uranium may result in an adverse environmental impact, UN Coordinator in the Kyrgyz Republic Nil Walker told Interfax-Kazakhstan. He said that in the former Soviet Union the Central Asian states were the key uranium producers. "Wide scale uranium production and enrichment produced highly toxic tailings piles. According to experts' estimated, the uranium disposal areas in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan contain over 100 million tons of radioactive waste. 11 million people residing in the Fergana Valley could be exposed to the environmental catastrophe," Walkers said. "Mud flows, landslides, torrential

rains and other disasters like earthquakes constantly affecting the uranium tailings piles may lead to contamination of rivers and soil of the Fergana valley with the radioactive waste" he said. He highlighted the commitment of the UN to coordinate the regional and international effort to find the solution to the problem. "The EU, Japan, Russia offer practical assistance in recycling the uranium tailing. The programs on utilization of tailings are also developed by IAEA, UN, the World Bank, EURASEC, the OSCE and other organizations," Walker said. According to Walker, "Lately private businesses have become interested in processing uranium tailings. Uranium producer could easily become investors of such recycling programs, as the demand for the uranium remains relatively high despite the crisis." Recycling of uranium tailings might be more economical viable than uranium production, the companies might invest in recycling of tailings and rehabilitation of the location in line with environmental standards, Walker said. The UN Coordinator in the Kyrgyz Republic highlighted the active stance of the Kyrgyz authorities, which lead the effort of recycling the uranium tailings in the region. The Kyrgyz Republic country needs more than US \$40 million for the rehabilitation of tailings and uranium production refuse sites, said Kamchybek Tashiev, Minister of Emergency Situations.

### **Kazakhstani Environmentalist Wants To Set Up Party Of Greens**

10 March 2009. Interfax-Kazakhstan. The chairman of the Tabigat [Nature] environmental union, Mels Yeleusizov, is going to set up a party of "greens" in Kazakhstan. "I came to the idea already a long time ago that only by uniting into a party, the patriots of Kazakhstan's nature can protect it," Yeleusizov said in his message circulated today. The head of Tabigat believes that "until topical issues of the environment are raised from the parliament rostrum", until members of "greens are represented in maslikhats [local councils]", "no laws will be adopted and implemented". At the same time, Yeleusizov said that the party, which has not registered yet, already has its own website, and its visitors can "learn about news related to the environment, find information about how to become the party's member, as well as legislation on the environment protection". Yeleusizov is a well known public figure in Kazakhstan, who has been involved in problems of the environment for over 20 years.

### **China, Kazakhstan Sign \$10 Billion Loan-for-Oil Agreements**

April 16. Bloomberg. China, the world's second-biggest energy consumer, will lend \$10 billion to Kazakhstan in return for a stake in an oil producer in the Central Asian country. China National Petroleum Corp. and KazMunaiGaz National Co. will buy AO Mangistaumunaigas, according to one of 11 agreements that were signed in the presence of President Hu Jintao and his Kazakhstan counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev in Beijing today. The \$10 billion aid comprises a \$5 billion loan from the Export- Import Bank of China to the Development Bank of Kazakhstan and another \$5 billion from China National to KazMunaiGaz. State-run China National and KazMunaiGaz plan to expand partnership in the oil and gas industry, according to the agreements. The nations also signed an initial accord to build a "road transport channel" linking western China and Europe. No details were provided. Other agreements include accords to cooperate in agriculture, education, finance and telecommunications. Kazakhstan, the biggest energy producer in the former Soviet Union after Russia, is spending 2.2 trillion tenge (\$14.6 billion), or 14 percent of gross domestic product, to prevent the first economic contraction in a decade.

### **U.S. Embassy Volunteers Clean Karaganda Highway**

April 22. Info Tsess. Even foreigners are helping to clean up Astana! On April 22, which is celebrated as Earth Day in the United States, volunteers from the U.S. Embassy in Astana went out to clean an area along the Karaganda Highway that stretches from the road police station to the village of Kuygenzhar. On this day, no matter if it is a "subbotnik" or Earth Day, people concentrate on the work they still need to do to protect the natural gifts of our planet

### **Earth Day In Astana**

April 22. Rakhat. A group of U.S. Embassy employees cleaned the roadsides of Astana to celebrate Earth Day. Both TV channels cited DCM Kevin Milas, who said he is impressed with how clean the roads of Astana are and encouraged the people of Kazakhstan to take care of our planet and respect its resources. Also, the journalists emphasized that not all embassy employees participated in the clean-up, which meant that the action was voluntary - unlike in the Soviet Union, where participation in "subbotniks" was called "voluntary" but nobody could skip it.

### **Baikonur to Remain "Busiest Spaceport In The World" For Next 50 Years**

25 March 2009. Interfax. The Baikonur space center leased by Russia from Kazakhstan will remain "the busiest spaceport in the world" at least in the next half a century, said Russian Federal Space Agency (Roscosmos) chief Anatoly Perminov. "This can be confirmed by the reconstruction and commissioning of the second launch pad for Soyuz spacecraft," Roscosmos quoted Perminov as saying in a statement published on the Roscosmos website on Wednesday. Perminov made his remarks while visiting the so-called Gagarin Launch Pad, from which a Soyuz TMA-14 manned spacecraft was launched to the International Space Station on Thursday.

### **International Consortium Launches Project to Protect Caspian Flora and Fauna**

April 8. Interfax-Kazakhstan. A consortium of international organizations led by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) together with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the financial support of the Global Ecological Facility (GEF), have initiated a new joint project, "The Caspian Sea: Restoring Depleted Fisheries and Consolidation of a Permanent Regional Environmental Governance Framework". "This Initiative is a long-standing outcome of the growing concerns of the five Caspian states - Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia over the need to increase environmental protection of the basin, whose status still remains an issue. Considering this, the grouping of developmental organizations intends to strengthen the capacity for biodiversity protection based on the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea (Teheran Convention)," UNDP Kazakhstan said. In general, the priority of the project will be the implementation of the principles of sustainable use and conservation of the biodiversity resources of the Caspian Sea through the establishment of regional environmental architecture.



## **Population Of Unique Saiga Antelopes Declining, But Signs Of Optimism Do Exist**

14 March 2009. Radio Free Europe. The saiga antelope is one of the world's strangest-looking mammals. Its bulbous, tubular nose filters out dust and warms cold air before it reaches the animal's windpipe. The bulging-eyed nomadic antelope is found in Russia's Republic of Kalmykia, as well as in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. But its population has shrunk to around 40,000 -- a decline of more than 80 percent in just the last 10 years. Now, however, there is a growing awareness of the need to preserve these unique animals and grounds for cautious optimism concerning their ultimate survival in the region. David Mallon is co-chair of the antelope specialist group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), an umbrella organization that groups hundreds of environmental associations around the world. He tells RFE/RL that the decline is mainly the result of hunting -- for meat and horns. "In the economic crisis, which has affected the former Soviet Union from about 1991 onwards, many people made much greater use of natural resources, including saiga, for meat," Mallon says. "Secondly, the horns of the male saiga are very valuable in traditional Chinese medicine, so many, many [male] saiga were hunted just for the horns. the sex ratio became so biased in the end, with a very small proportion of males remaining, that many females didn't breed, which has severely affected the reproductive rate." The saiga, whose horns fetch around \$100 a kilogram in China, was placed on a list of critically endangered species by the IUCN in 2002.

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## **IV. Upcoming Events**

### **Tajikistan: School-in-a-Box**

Carnegie Institute's School-in-a-Box project is set to unfurl on May 21 in a village outside of Dushanbe. This will be a prefabricated building powered by solar energy panels and will also have computers and broadband internet connection, something quite rare in rural Central Asia.

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### **Central Asia Regional Environmental Hub**

The Central Asia Regional Environment Officer (REO) is responsible for monitoring and reporting on trans-boundary environment, science, technology, and health issues in six countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.

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#### **U.S. Department of State, Office of Oceans, Environment, and Science**

[<http://oes.state.gov/>]

#### **U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs**

[<http://www.state.gov/p/sca/>]

#### **Regional Hub Website and Past Newsletters**

[Pending]